

Co-op brings local news for 86 years

Looking toward future

Danielle Danford | Staff writer

FREDERIC – A local cooperative, founded on a need for local news by farmers during the Great Depression, has served communities in Burnett, Polk and Washburn counties for 86 years. The Inter-County Cooperative Publishing Association publishes the Inter-County Leader and the Washburn County Register newspapers plus five Advertisers each week, totaling more than 700,000 papers printed each month.

With October being the annual month for recognition of cooperative-owned businesses, the Leader and Register newspapers recognize that their legacy and future rely in the cooperative model. In 2009 the Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel recognized the uniqueness of the Leader and Register's co-op ownership. Today the papers remain the only cooperative-owned newspapers in the state, and perhaps the nation.

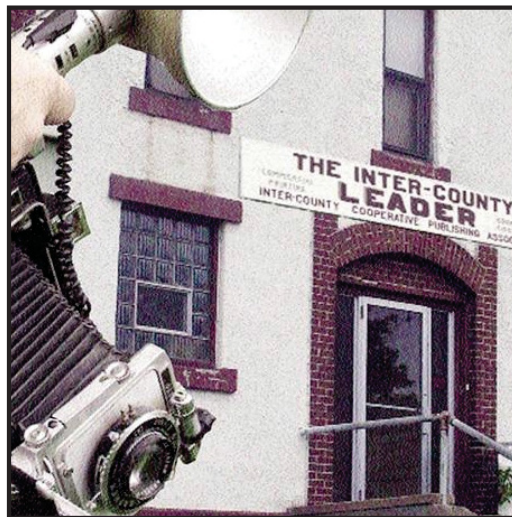
Bennie Bye, the cooperative's first newspaper editor, may have put what that means best in the first edition of the Inter-County Leader when he wrote, "The principal way in which we expect to make this paper different from the common run of papers is that we are in business for service and not for profit and intend to carry the truth to the public regardless of whose toes get pinched."

Now the cooperative operates a commercial printing department and three business locations in Frederic, Siren and Shell Lake which offer office supplies and convenient access to the co-op's other services. Between these businesses and the papers ICCPA employs about 60 people with an annual payroll of over \$1.5 million.

ICCPA has 330 stockholders that each own at least one share. Only newspaper subscribers can become a stockholder by purchasing a share at \$5. Stockholders attend the ICCPA annual meeting where the annual financial report is reviewed and they vote on the members of the ICCPA board of directors.

The ICCPA board of directors is a five-member board, members serve a three-year term. Current board members are President Ann Fawver and members Charles Linden, Amy Dueholm, Karen Krouch and Chuck Holicky.

The biggest difference between the ICCPA and a private business is how the co-op shares its success with its members, employees and patrons. Co-op members and employees receive profit sharing when the co-op



A building on the west end of Frederic was the home of the Inter-County Cooperative Publishing Association from 1939 to 1974. - File photo

enjoys a year with a profit. The co-op also pays patronage dividends to businesses that do \$1,000 or more in business with the co-op, in those profit years.

In 2018 the co-op reported an annual revenue of \$4.5 million, but no profit sharing. The last two years the co-op has been unable to pay out profit sharing or patronage dividends. Doug Panek, ICCPA manager, reports 2019 is looking similar to 2018, if not worse, but he remains optimistic about the future of the cooperative.

"This started in 1933, during the Depression, and I can't see it not continuing," said Panek, a 47-year co-op employee. Since 2005 the co-op has seen a \$1 million decrease in its annual revenue. Panek believes the internet has negatively impacted the profitability of the newspapers and advertising businesses due to its instantaneous and ubiquitous nature.

"The internet certainly has made a challenge for us, but I hope to continue putting out these papers so people continue to have jobs," he said. ICCPA was formed to bring the news to local communities and that's what it will continue to do into the future.

Other local cooperatives

ICCPA is not the only cooperative offering services to local communities. The following are cooperatives, credit unions and mutuals of Polk, Burnett and Washburn counties:

Agricultural feed, gas and pet supply

Atlas Cooperative, Luck
Burnett County Cooperative Agricultural Society, Grantsburg
Burnett Dairy Cooperative, Grantsburg
Countryside Cooperative, Amery and Milltown
Cushing Cooperative Society, Cushing
Precision AG/Countryside Co-op, Amery and Milltown
Polk-Burnett County Farm Bureau Cooperative, Balsam Lake
Shell Lake Cooperative Livestock Shipping Association, Shell Lake

Arts

ArtZ Gallery, Amery

Credit unions

Royal Credit Union, 14 area branches
Westconsin Credit Union, Amery
Indianhead Credit Union, Grantsburg
Indianhead Credit Union, Spooner

Grocery/farm food

Natural Alternative Food Co-op, Luck
Burnett Dairy Cooperative, Grantsburg
Hungry Turtle Farmers' Cooperative, Amery

Housing

Clear Lake Estates Cooperative, Siren
Big Trade Road Cooperative, Grantsburg

Insurance

Farmington Mutual Insurance, Osceola
Luck Mutual Insurance, Luck
Trade Lake Mutual Insurance, Frederic
United Mutual Insurance Company, Osceola

Legal services

Atticus Law Cooperative, Osceola

News and Printing

Inter-County Cooperative Publishing Association, Frederic, Siren and Shell Lake

Utilities

Polk-Burnett Electric Co-op, Centuria and Siren

Editor's letter

Our mission remains the same

As the publisher of two weekly newspapers, the Inter-County Cooperative Publishing Association sometimes struggles to define itself in a world where larger newspapers and all print papers in general have lost circulation and are experiencing a ground shift in how a new generation of readers want their news delivered.

Are newspapers still relevant?

Does local news matter?

The answer is both is yes.

Local news matters. And "news-papers," will continue to evolve as to how they choose to deliver news and communities will hopefully always demand a trusted source of local news – for decades, perhaps centuries, to come – whether it comes in print or online form, or both.

Our cooperative's mission remains the same as it did when we were founded more than eight decades ago – tell the story, hold up the mirror to our communities and provide a local forum for those issues that affect our corner of the world.

We try our best to do just that, for

our community – those who subscribe and read our papers on a regular basis.

This year's National Co-op Month theme is "By the Community, For the Community."

During National Co-op Month, we take the time to reflect on what we do, as the Inter-County Leader and Washburn County Register belong to an exclusive club, being the only cooperative-owned weekly newspapers in the United States.

The number of cooperatives in Washburn, Burnett and Polk counties has grown slightly over the past several years and it might be a sign that our communities and cooperatives work well together, using the principles of cooperatives such as voluntary and open membership, democratic member control and concern for community.

Providing a public forum is one of our mission statement goals and we feel it plays into our founding as a cooperative when a group of farmers, not happy with what they



felt to be incomplete and slanted news reporting, gathered \$5 bill donations for one share of what would become the Inter-County Cooperative Publishing Association.

Our first editor, Bennie Bye, assured readers their newspaper would be for everyone, not just those who had sought to establish it.

But by creating the cooperative, and a spirit of self-help, the Leader was launched from a small, two-story brick building at the end of Centuria's Main Street and we believe it all ended up helping the community at large over the years.

That was in 1933. We're no longer based in Centuria but we're still here. We deliver the news via ink and paper and via online platforms today, but, basically, our mission and our goals remain the same as 86 years ago. – Gary King

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